DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 011 EC 302 636

AUTHOR Lockwood, Anne Turnbaugh
TITLE Gifted and Talented Education: Needed or Not?
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Center for Educational Research, Madison. National Center for Effective Schools.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
JOURNAL CIT Focus in Change; n12 Fall 1993

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Identification; Definitions; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; *Enrichment Activities; *Gifted; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Instructional Effectiveness; Labeling (of Persons); Program Effectiveness; Secondary School Students; *Special Education; Special Programs; Student Development; Talent; Talent Development

ABSTRACT

This theme issue presents a variety of viewpoints on the topic of educational programs for gifted and talented students, in three papers by Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood. The first paper, "Beyond the Golden Chromosome," reviews the ideas of Joseph S. Renzulli concerning the definition of giftedness, use of the label of gifted, the need for identification procedures that go beyond test scores, and the need for schoolwide enrichment as implemented through enrichment clusters. The second paper, "The Ones Left Behind," presents the views of Mara Sapon-Shevin, who believes that singling out children for gifted and talented programs means that schools have given up on improving the quality of education for all students, that defining giftedness is irrelevant, and that gifted programs serve as a means of escape for schools from the pressures of vocal and influential parents. In the final paper, "All for Some Or Some for All?," James Vriesacker argues that the present structure of schools inhibits the kind of teaching that will achieve the desired effects, while gifted programs are ineffective in stimulating and furthering the talents of the target population. A commentary by Florence L. Johnson recommends that tracking and ability grouping be dismantled in favor of involving all students in active high-status learning. A list of 10 suggested readings concludes the issue. (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
National Center for Effective Schools
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

FOCUS IN CHANGE

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS FALL 1993 NO.12

ED 365 011

Gifted and Talented Education: Needed or Not?

ONE especially contentious topic in the current era of education reform is education for gifted and talented students. As available resources shrink, many question the wisdom and efficacy of programs targeted to a top group of "elite" students. Advocates of gifted and talented education argue that we must educate the best and the brightest who eventually will be the nation's leaders. They point to the programs that abound in special education, and contend that since resources are tapped to educate that population, schools must offer special programming for the students at the other end of the continuum.

But gifted and talented programs raise difficult, troubling questions. How is giftedness defined? How are gifted and talented children identified?

What about the under-representation of minority and low-SES children in gifted and talented programs? Is it true that parental pressure on a school can result in placement in gifted and talented programs? Finally, what effects do such programs have on the children identified as gifted and talented — and the ones who are not?

In this issue of FOCUS IN CHANGE, we present a variety of viewpoints on this topic, from an advocate of gifted and talented education to a critic of such programming to a teacher and program coordinator who remains ambivalent about their ultimate worth. Through this variety of lenses all trained on the same topic, we hope to inform the debate and provide you with current information that may shape your own programming efforts.

We hear first from Joseph S. Renzulli, well known in the field of gifted and talented education, who directs the federally funded National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut is a long-time advocate of widening the talent pool from the traditional 2 to 5% of the student population to include many more students — perhaps even all students — he argues for the formation of multiple talent clusters within schools to serve all students' varying interests and abilities.

Renzulli acknowledges that the field of gifted and talented education is much criticized for separating children for what is perceived as a privileged education. And while he admits that "the middle class takes care of its own," he exhorts schools to extend their traditional programming to minority students and low-SES students by broadening the definition of giftedness.

Although he claims he has not abandoned hope that the traditional curriculum can be improved, he points to the lack of change in schools, believing it is more pragmatic to embrace an enrichment approach embedded within regular school programming already in progress.

After Renzulli, we hear the views of Mara Sapon-Shevin, professor of education at Syracuse University. The author of a forthcoming book, *Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community*, she is sharply critical of gifted and talented education, which she indicts for enabling schools to keep their traditional curriculum and instruction mediocre. She challenges the assumptions that underpin the gifted and talented movement, and calls for schools to dramatically rethink and reconfigure the quality of instruction in all classrooms — for all children.

Last, both viewpoints are complemented with a voice from the field. James Vriesacker, a veteran social studies teacher in Wonewoc, Wisconsin, speaks from the unusual vantage point of one who has spent his entire career in one district — a district housed under one roof. Vriesacker, who began developing a district-wide gifted and talented program two years ago, also teaches regular social studies classes grades 7 through 12. He speaks movingly about the need to establish personal connections with all children — and the institutional constraints on fine teaching.

While Vriesacker agrees in principle with Sapon-Shevin, he believes the present structure of schools inhibits and even prevents the kind of teaching that will achieve the desired effects. On the other hand, he is not convinced that gifted and talented programs — as they are traditionally designed — are very effective in stimulating and furthering the gifts and talents of the population they are intended to serve.

We conclude this issue with a bibliography of selected readings on gifted and talented education and with the "Commentary" by the new director of the National Center for Effective Schools: Florence L. Johnson. Dr. Johnson, previously Director of Human Relations for the Milwaukee Public Schools, brings a wealth of experience with her to NCES, which she briefly describes in her column, along with her views on education for the gifted and talented. We welcome her to the National Center for Effective Schools. ■

EC 302636

Photo: Peter Manesis

"The first objective of a school ought to be talent development."

BEYOND THE GOLDEN CHROMOSOME

What does it mean to be gifted and talented? Do pullout programs violate the principle of equity that is central to American education? When resources are diminishing, what justification can be made for programming that serves only the gifted and talented? What can be done about the under-representation of minority and low-SES children in gifted and talented programs? For answers to these and other questions, we turned to Joseph S. Renzulli, director of the federally-funded National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut. Renzulli, a professor of educational psychology, has engaged in a variety of research and development activities dealing with identification systems, program development models, a curriculum development model, and a model for evaluating programs for the gifted and talented. A consultant to numerous school districts and agencies, he served as a staff member on the White House Task Force on the Education of the Gifted. Renzulli began his work as a classroom teacher of gifted and talented students, and through his research and program development activities, maintains close contact with teachers and students involved in special programs for the gifted and talented.

Joseph Renzulli asks that people think about gifted and talented education in terms of what they want for their own children. "Think about the little boy whose mother and father were at my house last week," he exhorts. "They have a son who is going into the fourth grade who is doing algebra. In his school they finally get into division in the fourth grade. Should we just let him sit through fourth grade? These parents were crying; the kid is dying. He doesn't want to go to school; he's getting sick. And he loves math."

This anecdote, to Renzulli, resonates with the needs of gifted and talented children. Although he is careful to emphasize that talent should be developed in all children — not only those who have been identified as gifted or talented — he admits that not all children will be able to achieve as much as others.

Yet Renzulli argues against a narrow definition of giftedness, one that would restrict entrance to gifted and talented programs to those children who possess what he sardonically terms "the golden chromosome." A proponent of a three-part model of giftedness since the late 1970s — and an advocate for higher representation of minority and low-SES children in gifted and talented programs — Renzulli states that schools must become places where talent can be developed for all students.

In fact, the use of "gifted" as a label is something he rejects outright. He explains that it is more beneficial for children and teachers alike when the emphasis is placed on developing gifted behaviors. "When a parent comes to me and says, 'I have a gifted child,' I say, 'Wait a minute. Tell me what your child does. Talk to me about their writing, their science, their music. If you begin our conversation by telling me you have a gifted child, you are creating a gulf between us.'"

He points to the detrimental effects the label "gifted/talented" can have on children. "I was in a middle school recently and a girl approached me. She asked if I could do away with the word 'gifted.' When I asked her why, she said it was a word that was hung around her neck like an albatross.

"She was, in fact, very bright and in a special program, but her regular classroom teachers would remind her that she had been identified as gifted and therefore she wasn't allowed to misspell a word. When she would return to the classroom from her special program, one of them would say: 'You're back from the smarty party.' Obviously this is not productive."

Defining Giftedness

What exactly does it mean to be gifted? How best can it be defined? Renzulli emphasizes that he uses both "gifted" and "talented" to describe certain behaviors and how they can be nurtured. "I use the words synonomously, generally not as a state of being — that is, a person is gifted or not gifted — but as adjectives. That is, we talk about the *development* of giftedness. In the adult world, 'gifted' is used as an adjective. People say: 'So-and-so is a gifted pianist.' Therefore, the word 'gifted' is almost always tied to some area of human performance."

In fact, using "giftedness" as a state of being feeds accusations of elitism that have plagued the gifted and talented movement, Renzulli says. As he explains some of the debates within the gifted and talented community, it is clear that different, controversial perspectives on giftedness exist.

"How children are identified as gifted or talented has to do with where one falls on the conservative to liberal continuum within the gifted and talented community," he explains. "Certainly the conservative end of the continuum does look at cut-off scores on IQ tests and those things that are more objective and precise. The conservatives also want bright or gifted kids to be educated as separate groups."

Renzulli defines his own work as falling on the liberal end of the continuum. He argues for broader identification of gifted and talented children, maintaining that all children should have equal access to many opportunities to do challenging things within school. In fact, he believes a broader definition of "giftedness" and wider identification procedures are

imperative, not just a nod in the direction of being politically correct. He points to the under-representation of minority and poor children in traditional gifted and talented programs.

"In my work," he says, "I've tried to put less emphasis on tests. I have tried to expand the size of the talent pool, which traditionally in most states has been from two to five percent and almost exclusively IQ score related."

He illustrates the dangers of identifying gifted and talented children based on IQ scores alone with the story of Gretchen, who discovered she liked the work of Louisa May Alcott while in elementary school. "She was also interested in cooking," he says, "and under the guidance of a teacher we had trained, she analyzed everything Louisa May Alcott had ever written for references to food. She then researched and field-tested each of the recipes, giving them ratings in terms of difficulty."

The role of the teacher as what Renzulli calls "the talent-developer" was pivotal at the next stage. "The teacher got her an appointment with Little, Brown and Company, which was Louisa May Alcott's publisher."

Clearly, Renzulli is proud of the results. "Today there is a Louisa May Alcott cookbook — written by Gretchen — published by Little, Brown and Company." To him, the linchpin upon which Gretchen's story is poised is the argument between advocates of equity and advocates of excellence. Renzulli believes schooling can — and should — accommodate both. As he puts it, while opportunities must be provided for all children to develop their talent and gifts, opportunities for children who — in his words — "go the distance" must also be part of a quality education or schools will fail in their mission to educate all children.

He stresses that enrichment experiences such as Gretchen's differ from those provided in a conventional classroom where emphasis is placed on covering required material within rigid slots of time.

While some children would not be able to write something that would gain acceptance by a commercial publisher, he maintains that does not mean their work lacks utility. "Thinking, feeling, and acting like a practicing professional means that they have an orientation towards precision, towards closure, towards creativity."

But if Gretchen's admission to the enrichment program at her school had been dictated by her IQ score alone, Renzulli points out she may not have qualified. "Imagine if Gretchen had a 129 IQ and she was in a district that required an IQ score of 130 in order to qualify for a gifted/talented program."

Although he acknowledges that most districts do not rely on IQ test scores as heavily as they did in the past, they do look at cut-off scores on generally administered standardized achievement tests as admissions criteria into gifted and talented programs.

A Ticket to Take the Test

How do these cut-off scores affect minority or low-SES children? In his response, Renzulli identifies some traditional, test-score-dominated identification procedures that effectively served to keep minority and poor children out of gifted and talented programs.

"Most states that claimed they used multiple criteria for identification of gifted and talented children were actually using what I call the multiple criteria smoke screen. In other words, they would gather teacher ratings, parent ratings, self ratings, peer ratings, and samples of work. But these ratings would simply get the child a ticket to take the test.

"I call this the multiple criteria smoke screen because it makes us look as though we're being more flexible, but the gatekeeper to the programs is still the test. Let's say a teacher sees a remarkable talent in music or poetry or science. That goes into the trash can if the youngster doesn't measure up on the test."

Renzulli began recommending that schools expand their talent pools to approximately 15% to 20% of their student bodies in the late 1970s. Today his view has broadened: He advocates placing all children in what he calls "multiple talent clusters" — based on their interests and abilities.

He explains the original rationale that underpinned his efforts to expand the talent pool. "If you take an individual school's population, economically it could be very affluent or very poor. About fifteen to twenty percent of that population performs at the eighty-fifth percentile and up. In educational programming terms, that means that those youngsters probably have mastered a fair amount of the content of a subject matter area."

He clarifies that although these percentages are based only on academic achievement, they indicate that this top group of students qualifies for something they are not receiving in the regular curriculum. "These kids don't need all the time normally spent in the regular curriculum. They're candidates for various kinds of enrichment experiences."

But scores on achievement tests alone are not a sufficient way to judge who belongs in enrichment clusters, he says. "When I select the talent pool, I would like to have room in it for kids who are recommended by criteria that have absolutely nothing to do with tests. In other words, if a teacher says that Susie or John is the best story-writer in my class — but they don't score high enough on the test — that child belongs in the talent pool as well."

Renzulli believes in weighting teacher observations equally with test scores so that the number of children who have access into the talent pool can automatically be increased.

The power of adding teacher observations as an equally weighted factor along with test scores, he maintains, is that populations that have been under-represented in gifted and talented programs have an opportunity to be included.

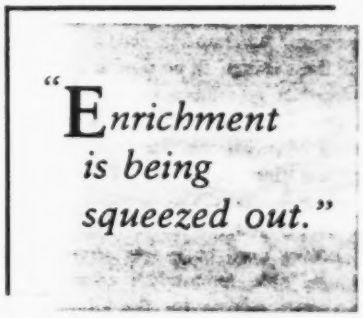
"As you move the definition or concept of giftedness toward the *development* of giftedness, we then do everything we can to develop that talent. Some kids are, in fact, going to go farther than others, but my concern is that we sidestep the pre-selection issue. If I won't help you in the development of your talent until I have something down on paper that says: 'You are a certified gifted child,' that isn't fair. Once we remove that, I can give a lot of kids an opportunity to experience new and different things in addition to the regular curriculum."

What about critics of traditional gifted and talented programs who assert that they are dominated by white, middle-class children? Renzulli does not hesitate. "The fact is that it's true," he says. "The middle class takes care of its own."

Given that, how do schools need to change before minority or low-SES children will be represented proportionally? In his response, Renzulli points to what he perceives as the failure of "drill and kill" teaching. "The compensatory education model in this country has been a failure," he says bluntly. "Basically that model says: 'You're not doing well, so I'm going to give you some practice and drill in your deficient areas, and that will help you improve.'"

He adds, "That seems logical. But we've taken models originally designed for handicapped children with a limit on their upper learning limit and tried to use them with children who don't have an upper limit on their learning ability but are behind in school because they come from relatively poor backgrounds."

To Renzulli, schools need to make a commitment to enrichment as part of their curriculum. "Having an enrichment approach has much better results than drill and kill. A friend of mine once said, 'Diagnostic and prescriptive learning means that you find out what kids can't do, what they won't do, what they don't like to do, and you spend the rest of the ye beating them to death with it.'"



Increasing the numbers of under-represented youth in gifted and talented programs, he says, means that schools need to improve their basic learning program in ways that differ from what has already been tried. "Admittedly, it is very hard to take a youngster into advanced work when the youngster is struggling just to keep her head above water on basic skills, but capitalizing on students' strengths and interests replaces too much time spent in practice activities."

Renzulli has divided schoolwide enrichment into a three-part model which he explains in terms of the activities proposed at each of the three levels of enrichment. "Type one enrichment includes general exploratory experiences; type two enrichment includes things like research skill activities. Type three enrichment focuses on individual and small group investigations of real problems, which are not simulations, but actual problems."

He notes, "What makes the problem real is a real audience; what makes an audience real is that they go to something because they want to, or because it's part of their jobs."

He illustrates with another example. "Recently some kids did a study of the last ax-handle factory in Connecticut. They interviewed the sixth-generation family member who was still running the factory. Their work was eventually entered into the county historical society oral history archives. The point of this is that if I know that a child wants to do an ax-handle study better than anybody in the world, but he missed the cut-off by a couple of points, then I'm not leaving room for interest, enthusiasm, excitement, and commitment."

How does the three-part model fit into the identification of potentially gifted and talented students? Renzulli responds, "We are looking at what is essentially performance-based identification. We also look at a large measure of interest as well as ability."

If school-wide enrichment is a process designed to develop talent in all children, why aren't its recommended activities interwoven into the regular curriculum? Should children be separated out at all for special treatment? "The model focuses on various ways of providing differentiated services both within regular classrooms and in other grouping patterns that reflect common interests in a topic or problem," Renzulli responds. "In the real world, which this model is patterned after, people come together because of common interests and purposes rather than abilities."

He adds, "The regular curriculum has so overwhelmed schools that enrichment is being squeezed out. What I'm asking for is the creation of a slot within the school which holds the enrichment clusters. A lot of places are doing this, and doing it very effectively. And while I would love to see more of this infused into the regular curriculum, that's Nirvana."

Sensitive to the separation and grouping issue, Renzulli gives his rationale for enrichment clusters. "They are equitable as long as kids come together because of a common interest and direct it toward a common goal,

and as long as anyone can get into the group."

But abilities will differ. "Of course," Renzulli acknowledges, "there will be a division of labor within that group, including an intellectual division. Some kids will be good at taking pictures and transporting equipment. Others will be good at writing scripts. I only have an argument with people who do not agree with grouping when every kid gets the same thing at the same time in every classroom."

The enrichment clusters are organized by interests, such as language arts and humanities, science, art, math, and computers. "The titles of these clusters do not say, 'We're gifted.' They do not say, 'We're better than somebody else.' There are no intimations of superiority or elitism."

Examples of titles for enrichment clusters Renzulli points to with pride include the African American Cultural Study Group and the Female Math Support Group. "We begin," he says, "by asking: 'What do cultural study groups do? Are we going to look at contemporary Black writers, or contemporary Black artists? Where can we find information?' The teacher's role is very different from the traditional role that says: 'I will now teach you a lesson on contemporary Black writers.'"

Although Renzulli is enthusiastic about his concept of enrichment clusters and the different roles teachers can play in them, he quickly provides a pragmatic example of how difficult they can be to implement due to the ways schools currently are structured. "I was at a middle school a couple of months ago. One of my graduate students had convinced the principal to provide one hour a day for enrichment clusters. Before I talked to the teachers, I was reminded three times I couldn't talk past ten minutes to four because of the union contract. And one teacher said, 'I teach five language arts classes a week and now that I've got to do enrichment clusters I will have another preparation to do.'"

This teacher's comment stunned Renzulli. "I responded by asking the teachers to picture themselves in their most ideal teaching situation, doing something that they loved and that the kids loved. As we started talking, we discussed what people produce. What do poets produce, what do environmentalists produce, what do ecologists produce? What do kids need to learn to do these things? In no time at all, they picked up on the concept. What is the point? The point is that when teachers think of enrichment clusters as another preparation, we've lost them to a mechanistic machine mentality."

Surprisingly, Renzulli claims that teachers need little special training to be able to conduct enrichment activities geared for the gifted and talented. "Teachers need to have a sense of what creative productivity is all about. In the real world, creative productivity is almost always manifested in two ways: products and services. Teachers have to learn how to help kids problem-find and focus within an interest area."

Renzulli points out that much of what is called research in schools is reporting from encyclopedias or resource books. "Teachers need to learn how to help students find methodological resources, books on oral history, and guides for conducting social science research. Another thing that makes type three enrichment activities real as opposed to a ritualistic report is providing feedback and opportunities for revision that lie within the child's capabilities. How much escalation can you get away with without breaking the child's spirit? You can't expect fifth graders to do what they do at Harvard Graduate School."

Although Renzulli is optimistic about the potential that he believes multiple enrichment clusters possess to improve schooling for all children, he believes conventional schooling and long-held teacher attitudes hamper the development of enrichment activities. "Most teachers think schools are places for aptitude development and achievement development. In many cases that means what shows up on standardized tests. The pressures are harder than ever to get those scores up. In the process of emphasizing those scores, we've neglected to see if teachers have these other skills — coaching and mentoring skills — and I think they're easy to learn. Look at any good 4-H director or teachers who are working with the theater group or the school yearbook. Good learning takes place in these situations.

"But the elephant in the room is tests. Teachers in gifted and talented programs have gravitated toward teaching situations that allow more academic freedom. They don't have to cover a certain amount of material by a certain date. I believe more teachers would do some of this in the regular curriculum if they were released from the pressure of getting the test scores up."

Renzulli ends with another example. "I know of one kid who was economically poor, but so skilled in art that eventually a local public building had a display of his pencil drawing on lunch bags that he did every day on the way to school. They were so beautiful that many of the teachers started to notice them, reward them, encourage them, and ultimately got him some help from the art teacher. He had a remarkable talent, yet he was a kid that most other people considered a loser.

"School-wide enrichment says achievement is important, but a more noble task for schools is talent development. There are no monuments in town squares to people who scored high on tests. There are monuments in town squares for people who developed the talent, who did something with it. Therefore, the first objective of a school ought to be talent development. And the second one should be reading, writing, arithmetic.

"That will not sell well in a lot of circles but I believe it." ▲

Photo: Peter Maness

"'If the sons and daughters of company presidents and bank directors had to go to school in a slum school, buttons would be pushed, words would be spoken, rules would be broken.'"

THE ONES LEFT BEHIND

ANNE TURNBAUGH LOCKWOOD

Are special programs necessary to meet the needs of gifted and talented children, or would curricula slated for the gifted be good for all children — regardless of special abilities? Should children identified as gifted/talented receive special services? What effects do special programs for the gifted and talented have on children who are not included in them? We posed these questions to a critic of gifted education, Mara Sapon-Shevin, who is professor of education in the Division for Teaching and Learning at Syracuse University. The author of a book entitled Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community, *to be published in Spring 1994 by SUNY Press, she is a widely published scholar and a board member of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education. Her work centers on creating fully inclusive schools, cooperative learning, and anti-racist curricula.*

TO Mara Sapon-Shevin, singling out children for placement in gifted and talented programs means that schools have given up on improving the quality of education for all students. She says forcefully, "One of the assumptions of pulling gifted kids out for special experiences is that what is happening in the regular classroom is not working for them. It's boring, it's repetitive, it's inflexible, and it's not meeting their needs. But saying that the solution is pulling them out into special programs implies that what goes on in regular classrooms is okay for the other people who are left there."

She enlarges on her point. "It's like saying what's being served for lunch is not good for these two kids so they have to go somewhere else to eat, but it's a meal that's all right for everybody else. Another way of looking at it would be to say: 'Wait a minute. Maybe there is something wrong with how we have made this meal altogether.'"

Sapon-Shevin indicts conventional classroom practices, insisting that they must change so that all children will be challenged. "Let's look at the regular classroom and see if it's really meeting the needs of any or all of the kids in it. Why is a gifted child bored? For example, all the kids are reading in the same reading book but this child has different interests and a different reading level."

She adds as an aside, "To start with, it's hard to believe that it's appropriate for the other 29 to be in the same book. It's not just inappropriate to pull child number 30 out, but the point is that the whole way instruction is structured in typical classrooms limits him and doesn't necessarily accommodate anybody's individual needs."

Sapon-Shevin pinpoints one of the major assumptions that she claims underlies — and legitimizes — the entire gifted and talented movement. She says, "There is a belief that what is inappropriate for gifted students is appropriate for everyone else." Obviously this troubles her.

"My favorite example is that when my older daughter was seven, we got a note from her school telling us she was eligible for the gifted program. I was opposed to it politically and wouldn't put her into it, but I went to the meeting to find out what they would say. School staff described a wonderful unit for gifted students who were going to be studying birds. They would do bird watching and draw birds and learn bird calls and study birds from different countries. It all sounded, in fact, wonderful. There was nothing objectionable in the curriculum.

"I raised my hand and asked: 'What are the other second graders doing?' The person said, 'Worksheets.' So the question is, 'Why wouldn't that kind of a unit be what you do for all second graders?'"

If the educational experiences typically offered students in gifted and talented programs would indeed benefit all students, why aren't they already part of the regular curriculum? Sapon-Shevin says that gifted and talented programs, in fact, function to keep schools mediocre. "It's a way of giving up and saying, 'If we can't make it right for all kids, we might as well make it right for some.'"

"Then we have to ask: Which ones? Which ones are we making it right for? Who are the kids that it's not right for? How does that get decided? How does that play into existing social class differences in our schools? I've never seen anything in a gifted program that didn't seem like a wonderful thing for all kids to be doing."

What about children whose abilities clearly do not match what is occurring in the classroom, such as a fourth grader who can perform algebraic functions *[see first article]*? She responds quickly, "That assumes that fourth grade is constructed in certain ways. Fourth grade is a class where the kids do large-group math instruction, and they do it together.

"How about a fourth grade where they're doing cooperative learning in math, where they have a whole range of different problems that kids can work on depending on their ability? In other words, kids can work on individual problems; they can work with partners or groups. Gifted programs do seem inevitable if we are unable to see past standard-issue regular classrooms. But gifted programs are not inevitable in those places that have said: 'If this class is not right for this kid who can do algebra, is it all right for the other kids? Is it possible that they're really all at the same level in math?'

"My guess is that there are at least sixteen math levels in that fourth grade.

This kid may stick out more, but there are probably others who aren't being served either. There's a kid in there who needs manipulatives, and there's a kid who doesn't understand multiplication and they're on division. It's a very, very pedestrian way of thinking about teaching and learning as the delivery of specific content to a group of students at the same time in the same way at the same pace."

Defining Giftedness

To Sapon-Shevin, it is irrelevant, distracting and even harmful to consider what percentage of the student population constitutes the gifted or talented. She says dismissively, "It's not useful. All the debate about it is a distraction from the central question: What kind of education do we provide to children? How do we find out about *all* children's strengths and interests and areas of need, and then structure a curriculum that is responsive to that? We wouldn't be in this debate if we didn't have a dual system, if we didn't have to decide who was in and who was out.

She continues, "We wouldn't describe kids as gifted or nongifted. We would say, 'This is Rebecca. She loves to read. These are the kinds of problems she likes. These are the kinds of things that she is not fond of doing.' We would describe all kids in that way and we would structure a rich curriculum around all of them. We wouldn't need to figure out: 'Are you one of these or not one of these?'"

Why has the American educational system evolved to a point where special programs abound? To Sapon-Shevin, the question has several answers. "We still work with a deficit model in education. We identify children who are either doing well or doing badly, and we attempt to remediate them. Therefore we have kids who are learning disabled, mentally retarded, and emotionally disturbed. It often makes sense that people say, 'If we have those kinds of kids and provide them with services, we should be providing services to the kids at the other end.'

"But here's the great irony. Nationally we are saying, 'Let's construct a rich, exciting, heterogeneous classroom where all kids can be learning and growing. Let's not segregate kids. Let's not pull them out. Let's figure out how to do individualized instruction that makes sense.' But this other kind of model is deeply entrenched because of things like funding and job titles. We have a journal of gifted education, teachers of the gifted, and federal and state funding for gifted programs.

"Because things are channeled in that way, they are perpetuated. Once it gets started, and you have the service, no one wants to drop it. They're afraid that if they give up that funding they'll lose the money."

But another, even more political point to her is that programs for the gifted are another way that schools continue to select and sort youth. "We look to the schools to tell us who is going to work at McDonald's and who is going to go to college. It becomes part of a larger tracking system. It's really another way for schools to say, 'We don't have enough money to go around. Who should we spend it on? Who matters? Who counts? Who is worth investing in?"

The Silence Within Schools

Children suffer when others are singled out, separated, and placed into programs for the gifted, according to Sapon-Shevin. She illustrates with a poignant story. "In my research, I interviewed a teacher who told me about one little kid who asked her: 'When will I get to go to the group?' She said, 'Well, it's for children who are interested in animals.' He said, '*I'm* interested in animals.' What is she supposed to say? Is she supposed to say, 'You didn't test high enough to get into the group'"?

Teachers as well as children find special programs for the gifted a difficult issue to contend with, she maintains. "Many of the teachers that I interviewed were very uncomfortable with selecting and sorting kids. Teachers feel caught. How can they say, 'You can't go because you are not smart'? They don't want to say that. One teacher was so distressed that she even refused to talk to the kids about it. She said, 'Ask the school psychologist to come in and explain IQ tests to them. I don't even believe in them, so how can I explain them?' It's difficult to defend something that feels — and often is — like it is based on standards that are arbitrary.

"Kids don't tend to question things that make sense to them. It makes sense for a twelve-year-old to have a larger bike than a four-year-old because their legs don't reach the pedals. But when kids see that other kids are doing things that look interesting and exciting, how can they not want to join them? Children from a very young age are incredibly interested in fairness and justice, and how the rules get set."

Sapon-Shevin criticizes traditional, heavily IQ-score-based identification procedures used to select children for gifted programs, pointing out that frequently teachers do not select the youth with whom they will work. "Things are happening in their classroom communities that are not of their doing. Asking teachers to explain a decision they didn't make or a decision that they are not comfortable with puts them in a very awkward position."

She emphasizes, "We still have the illusion that this is America and there is democracy, that we are a classless system, that we have equal opportunity for all. The gist of the matter is that it's not true, and asking people to justify it is very painful."

The Ones Left Behind

Sapon-Shevin asserts that children always know where they fall on the ability continuum. "They know which

is the high reading group, and they know that whatever group has Michael is the slow group. They figure that out immediately."

She speaks about the effects of special programming on the children left behind from her own experience as well as her research. "We did not allow my daughter to be in the gifted program. Last year on Wednesdays, which was gifted day, a third of her class left. So what happens to the kids who get left behind?

"The teacher is in another terrible situation. She can't do something exciting and fun with the rest of the kids because the parents of the gifted children and the gifted children themselves complain. So often the kids end up spinning their wheels. The kids who are labeled not gifted are losing twice: not only did they not get to go to the gifted program, but their regular classroom community is disrupted."

Sapon-Shevin is distressed about the long-term negative effects of labeling on children. "This is an incredible self-fulfilling prophecy; an indication that children sense who they are in the world and what their capacity is, what the expectations for them are, how far they'll go and who they'll be. This is shaped early on by a specific inequitable program."

But what about possible negative effects on children identified as gifted? Can a social stigma result from such labelling and identification? "Some gifted kids will say, 'Thank God I had a gifted program because I felt like my intelligence was respected,'" Sapon-Shevin responds.

"But what is that saying about their regular classroom? Is that what makes the gifted program wonderful — that it allows you to escape from something lousy going on? Shouldn't we think about what that lousy thing is? If the regular classroom is really a place that is hostile to differences and unsafe for children who read differently, that's not saying much about it. I can't believe that a classroom that is inhospitable to a gifted child is hospitable to a Laotian child or a child with Down's syndrome."

She adds, "I want classrooms where lots of differences and diversity are respected. I've seen them. While a lot of kids who are in gifted programs report that those programs saved them, and while I think that is something we should listen to, the question is: 'Saved them from what?'"

Yet another point she wants to make is that being labeled and treated as gifted or talented can be stigmatizing in and of itself. "Kids so labeled talk about being teased, being called nerd, teacher's pet, egghead, things like that. Some people will argue that it's their giftedness that separates them and makes them be teased. But in fact, if that kind of difference was responded to differently in the regular classroom, it would not be the source of alienation."

To Sapon-Shevin, the regular classroom must be a place where diversity is not only tolerated but encouraged; where teachers feel equipped to meet the individual learning needs of every student. "Teachers are encouraged to think that you can't adjust the curriculum, or they feel they have to follow the book or the program, so the only solution for so-called gifted kids is to get them out of a rigid, inflexible system."

She points to a common instance where a classroom has three reading groups, arranged at different levels, each with its own book. "If we have a kid who clearly doesn't fit, we think we have to get him out of there. But why do we have reading groups? Maybe we shouldn't have reading groups at all. Maybe we should have skill groups, interest groups, whole language reading, class reading, independent reading, and plays. Maybe that's what reading should look like. Then we could say: 'That's Andrew; he's reading *Exodus* and he's really good at reading.' The fact that he's good at reading wouldn't be the source of alienation."

Perhaps most troubling to Sapon-Shevin is her belief that gifted programs serve as safety valves for schools, providing a means of escape from the pressures of vocal and influential parents. "Look at a city school in a large urban district with a mixed population. Let's say the whole school is not working very well. You have the children of professionals: the doctor's kids, the lawyer's kids, and the professor's kids. You say to them: 'We know it isn't great, but please stay in the neighborhood. We'll put your child in a special program. They won't have to be with these other kids.' So it removes them and leaves the rest of the system intact.

"Do I want my kid going to a violent school? No! Is the solution to put my kid in a special class so he doesn't have to be with children of color or poor children? That's not the solution, but it's a cheaper solution than really restructuring and rethinking the whole school."

She continues, "The kind of changes we need so that the whole school will be improved are curricular and pedagogical; they necessitate staff development and a different kind of decision-making in schools. Making limited, short-term changes will buy off the major critics, but don't really solve the problem. They keep schools from looking at the whole picture."

Sapon-Shevin recites a few lines from a song she quotes in her forthcoming book. "The song says, 'If the sons and daughters of company presidents and bank directors had to go to school in a slum school, buttons would be pushed, words would be spoken, rules would be broken.'"

She concludes with some heat, "If the fate of all children was really thrown in together, people would never stand for it. But because we give people the option — whether it's through private school or a gifted program — to get out of a dysfunctional system, we keep the whole system intact." ♣

What is the solution?
"I'm finding my way."

ALL FOR SOME OR SOME FOR ALL?

ANNE TURNBAUGH LOCKWOOD

What challenges do school staff who implement gifted and talented programming face? How do they respond to critics of gifted and talented programming who suggest that all education should be improved, not just the education of those identified as gifted or talented? What obstacles exist in traditionally structured schools to creative ways of serving the abilities of many children within the same classroom? We asked these questions of several teachers, and decided to publish the viewpoint of James Vriesacker, a veteran social studies teacher who was charged with the task of constructing a gifted and talented program two years ago within his rural Wisconsin district. Vriesacker has taught for thirty years — all in the same district — and holds a master's in curriculum and instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is working on a textbook for secondary school students who have been identified as gifted and talented.

It is clear that some of the contentious debates that permeate any discussion of gifted and talented education are not new to Jim Vriesacker — nor does he believe they have simple, clear-cut answers. Obviously committed to the egalitarian ideals central to American schooling, nonetheless he argues that the structure of conventional schools make it impossible to serve widely differing abilities and talents within one traditional classroom.

Should the special programming accorded the gifted and talented population be available to all children? Somewhat surprisingly, Vriesacker believes it should — in an ideal teaching situation.

How does he respond to critics who claim that what is offered the gifted and talented is actually just good teaching? "It is *great* teaching," he counters emphatically, "and there are very few great teachers."

Rather than criticizing his colleagues, he illustrates what he means by identifying what he perceives as weaknesses in his own teaching. "I've been teaching for over thirty years, and I really don't know how this can be done, how the differing abilities and interests of each child can be accommodated in the conventional classroom. Obviously, most people have strengths and weaknesses. One of my weaknesses is that I am interested in problems that require a lot of thought. I'm not as people-oriented as others, and therefore it's harder for me to break through my own reserve with a lot of kids.

"When I see students with potential, who have interests that I identify with, I go out of my way to work with them, sometimes very intensely. The problem is that our institutional system of schooling makes huge emotional demands on people. I can think of cases where I have been instrumental in helping kids see their way, but in all those cases it required immense amounts of time to become a mentor to them, to share a small part of their lives."

Vriesacker has an unusual vantage point from which to view gifted and talented programs: he is a gifted and talented program coordinator for the district of Wonewoc, Wisconsin, which has a student population of approximately 550 — K-12 — all housed in one school.

And although he has felt for several years that it is vital to work with students to identify their interests and build their capabilities, he came to his current position as a gifted and talented coordinator in addition to his responsibilities as a social studies teacher grades 7-12 after a state mandate that required all districts to establish programs for children identified as gifted and talented. In Wisconsin, he explains, identification is based on more than IQ test scores, and includes parent and teacher assessments.

But although Vriesacker believes in building special aptitudes and interests present in youth, he thoughtfully identifies some problems with education for gifted and talented youth. One is widening the definition of giftedness to a point where he contends it is losing its meaning. "There is a cliche that many are being forced to subscribe to right now," he says, "that everyone is gifted and talented. I don't agree. I've seen a teacher in a nearby school who developed a good program by selecting certain kids who were felt to have some creative possibilities and working at some length with them during the school year.

"Now because of the belief that everyone is gifted and talented, her work is so diluted that she sees each kid in the district on a one-to-one equivalent of fifteen minutes a year. I think that's ridiculous."

He explains that schools have expanded the percentage of the student population identified as gifted and talented. For example, in Wisconsin students are identified according to a definition of five kinds of giftedness: intellectual, academic, creative, leadership, and artistic.

"What this means," he adds, "is that a lot of the school population will be represented in the group designated as gifted and talented. If you identify 5 to 8% of the student population in each of the five areas, it will more closely resemble 20 to 25%, so we're looking at one quarter of the student population. The unfortunate part of this is that very few schools possess the resources to deal with those numbers of kids as far as a gifted and talented program is concerned."

He notes that in Wisconsin schools do not receive any extra money to serve the gifted and talented, yet are required by law to have gifted and talented programs. "This means that school systems must hire someone to coordinate the program, because there's a lot of paperwork and other things that must be done, even if no actual instruction occurs from the person in charge. Immediately there's a cost, and there aren't resources."

But he wants to make it clear that he is opposed not to the numbers of children gifted and talented programs must serve, but to the conventional ways in which schools are structured. To Vriesacker, this compounds the difficulties of trying to serve children of all abilities.

He quickly says that he does not restrict a definition of giftedness to performance on tests. "I've seen kids who are definitely not going to score higher than 100 on an IQ test, but they show ability that is far higher than many of their classmates who would score much higher. What being gifted or talented means is having a definite interest and being willing to pursue it wholeheartedly. That makes the difference. Too often we think of talents as needing great intelligence to go along with them, but often talented people simply have a love for what they do and persistence that causes them to put whatever resources they have into following that pursuit."

Are Gifted and Talented Programs Needed?

Why is there a need for programs to serve the population identified as gifted and talented? Vriesacker responds with an argument frequently heard by advocates of gifted and talented education. "There's obviously a national need for people who are capable of making big changes in American society to make it function more competitively in the modern world," he says. "There's always a national need to develop the talents that a nation's citizens have. Everyone benefits from that."

Apart from that, he admits to a personal reason for his belief in special programming for gifted and talented youth. "I always identify with kids with talents, who for one reason or another are never able to fully develop them. Some are held back because they are perfectionists. Some just feel different from everyone else and keep striving to be like everyone else and therefore never develop their own abilities. If one has talents, they have to be developed or a person will never be satisfied with himself. It's an attempt, at least partially, to rescue students from problems that I feel that I had."

> *"Much of what passes for gifted and talented education is no more than playing games . . ."*

On the other hand, Vriesacker is critical of pullout programs frequently used with this population. "I view them negatively," he says, "because frequently they make an enemy of the classroom teacher. A second problem with pullout programs is that the scheduling is difficult, especially in a small school. It becomes impossible to schedule a pullout program that isn't going to conflict with some part of the curriculum that the student needs."

Although he believes schools must provide for special interests and aptitudes, he is ambivalent — even critical — of the long-term effectiveness of traditional gifted and talented programs. "I do not have much faith in what's considered typical gifted and talented programs," he says bluntly. "Based on what I've seen, most of the gifted and talented programs suffer from the same problem that the educational program suffers from in general: trying to teach people things they don't want to know.

"Much of what passes for gifted and talented education is no more than playing games, doing little mental puzzles that have no real cumulative value. It's similar to taking questions from a logic test and giving them to the kids to figure out. For some unknown reason, people believe that develops minds.

"For me, the only really effective way of running a gifted and talented program is through interests, through helping kids develop interests in specific areas. When they have decided on something they want to do, they will discover what they need to do in order to do it. That's the only really effective way to get kids to learn much."

But he finds it unsettling that some students — regardless of aptitude — seem unable to identify a strong interest in anything. "I'm not sure what we do with kids who aren't involved in something," he comments. "I don't know how we can educate kids in general situations where everybody's got to learn the same thing. I do believe we have to help kids find something they're interested in and good at doing, and then help them develop a goal that's meaningful to them. The next step is giving them whatever they need to get there."

But all sorts of constraints mitigate against his vision of education for gifted and talented children. One concern frequently not voiced by school staff is the barriers between regular classroom teachers and teachers of the

gifted and talented. Since Vriesacker teaches regular social studies classes as well as functioning as district gifted and talented coordinator, he knows the problem well.

"I'm not sure how universal my experience is," he says somewhat diffidently, "but I have found that some of the staff have looked on my role in a very negative way. They see me released a period a day to do what they see as nothing, whereas they're very aware that more and more is required of them. Not only more is required by the state, but more is required by the student. So teachers see more and more being dumped on them, and they see one of the rank and file given one extra prep hour. This creates resentment."

He explains that the resentment staff feel can make his job as gifted and talented coordinator more difficult, even at times impossible to perform. "In my job as coordinator, I try to have students identified by more people involved in the selection process. I go to grade school teachers and ask what their feelings are about a kid. There are enough teachers that if I visited them individually it would use up an enormous amount of my time, even in our small school. There simply isn't time for the personal encounters people like."

Fewer personal encounters, he explains, are often met with resistance or apathy. "If I put a note in teachers' mailboxes asking them to go through a selection procedure, I'm adding one more thing to what they already have to do. If I were to spend more time with teachers, I'm sure I would be able to get over some of the hurdles, but I don't have time. Even if I wanted to do it, I wouldn't be meeting the standards that I believe the school administrators and the board feel I should meet.

"Because of these two reasons, I'm resented — and I don't have any authority to get my peers to cooperate. Very often, I find they won't cooperate. If I ask for identifications, I'll get them back from only half the staff."

Vriesacker has been developing the district's gifted and talented program for the past two years. He explains the difficulty of meeting state requirements as well as measuring up to his own standards about the content and character of such a program. "The program has real possibilities," he says, "but I feel hamstrung in a variety of ways. One is that I must meet the requirements of the state, even though I believe it's important to have them because of the recalcitrant districts that otherwise would do nothing. Also, developing a program that people believe is meaningful takes energy away from what I think is really important, which is making emotional connections with kids and working with them. That doesn't look good on paper. If you meet with one kid three hours a day, what do you have to show for it? In institutions, that's not a very good summary of how one spends one's time."

What is the solution? Vriesacker pauses, and then says slowly, "I'm finding my way." ♣

For further reading...

Allan, S. D. (1991, March). Ability-grouping research reviews: What do they say about grouping and the gifted? *Educational Leadership, 48*(6), 60-74.

Feldhusen, J. F. & Willard-Holt, C. (1993). Gender differences in classroom interactions and career aspirations of gifted students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 18*, 355-362.

Harris III, J. J. & Ford, Donna W. (1991). Identifying and nurturing the promise of gifted black American children. *Journal of Negro Education, 60*(1), 3-18.

Meade, J. (1991, February). Turning on the bright lights. *Teacher Magazine*, 37-43.

Reis, S. M. & Renzulli, J. S. (1992, October). Using curriculum compacting to challenge the above-average. *Educational Leadership, 50*(2), 51-57.

Renzulli, J. S. & Reis, S. (1985). *The schoolwide enrichment model: A comprehensive plan for educational excellence*. Mansfield Center, CN: Creative Learning Press.

Sapon-Shevin, M. (1990, January-February). Gifted education and the deskilling of classroom teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education, 41*(1), 39-48.

Sapon-Shevin, M. (1987, Fall). Giftedness as a social construct. *Teachers College Record, 89*(1), 39-53.

Commentary References

Gamoran, A. (1992). Is ability grouping equitable: A synthesis of research. *Educational Leadership, 50*(2), 11-16.

Haberman, M. (1991, December). The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan, 73*(4), 290-294.

COMMENTARY

FLORENCE L. JOHNSON

IT is with deep gratitude and excitement that I greet you as the new director of the National Center for Effective Schools. I am deeply committed to the Effective Schools ideals and am convinced that my leadership will move NCES in a positive direction.

My 23 years of experience in education and educational research have provided me a macro perspective of current education problems and a clear vision for the direction of the Effective Schools movement nationally. I have been a third grade teacher and a reading specialist in Black poor elementary schools. I later became involved in school administration as a desegregation planning specialist, human relations specialist and director of human relations.

I received my education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, with a Bachelor of Science in elementary education and language arts, a Master of Science in Curriculum & Instruction and Remedial Reading, and a Ph.D. in Educational Administration and Curriculum & Instruction with a minor in Urban Affairs.

Approximately 16 years ago I became formally involved in the Effective Schools philosophy and process upon meeting and working with Ron Edmonds and Wilbur Brookover to develop our Effective Schools Project in 20 all-Black Milwaukee schools known as Project RISE. Lessons from this Project sparked my interest toward further research and expansion of the concept that school effects make the greatest difference in the education of children, particularly African American children.

As director of NCES, my primary goal will be to increase the involvement of schools and school districts nationwide and abroad in the Effective Schools Process with particular emphasis in urban areas. The intent will be to acquaint more urban school practitioners with the Effective Schools research in order to strengthen their vision and belief in the concept that regardless of race, social class and family background, all children can learn the school's curriculum if provided the appropriate school learning environment. A secondary goal will focus on refining the Effective Schools Process by conducting rigorous research and evaluation of established programs and integrating, as appropriate, other relevant research on school improvement into the process.

What are my views on the debate about gifted and talented education and equity? My vision for education is equity for all regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or other diversities. To me, equity in this sense means guaranteeing that all children are provided access to high-status knowledge, high expectations for academic attainment, sufficient funding levels to meet their individual needs, appreciation and respect for their diversities, and active instruction to obtain skill mastery.

The challenge for educators in an increasingly diverse society is to create a balance between excellence and equity. Given the disparity in minority and majority student performance on standardized tests (the main indicator of giftedness), educators must diversify their definition of giftedness without reducing standards.

The intent must be to increase the educational quality of all students. Although "gifted" students are generally doing well academically, research shows a decline in the educational performance of America's students in general and low-income and minority students in particular. And although educational reform efforts to bridge the gap between minority and majority students' achievement have had some success, the achievement differential between groups is still problematic. In my judgment, part of the solution lies in the school's willingness to dismantle tracking and ability grouping and pedagogical differentiation — practices which have not only denied some students a right to a high-quality education but more importantly, facilitated the establishment of their self-fulfilling prophesies through labeling and low self-expectations. These practices reproduce inequality and inequity.

Research shows that ability grouping and tracking significantly affect the distribution of achievement of high school students in British and U.S. schools (Gamoran, 1992). Gamoran (1992) further postulates that "tracking often benefits high achievers but not their counterparts in other groups" (p.13). This benefit can be attributed to the pedagogical difference in high and low tracks. Low-tracked students are provided low-paced uninvolved instruction while those in high groups are generally involved in fast-paced active learning environments (Haberman, 1991).

The decision to reduce tracking and ability grouping should not result in lowering the pace of instruction for high groups and tracks in order to have heterogeneous classes. The decision must be an accelerated curriculum for all. Students of various predetermined performance levels can benefit from working together, constructing knowledge and making connections around concepts. I am convinced that when we involve all children in active high-status learning and convey the expectation of mastery, the achievement of all groups will increase. ♣

(References may be found on page opposite.)

Gifted and Talented Education

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Madison, Wisconsin
Permit No. 1622

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
WISCONSIN CENTER FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
1025 W. JOHNSON STREET, SUITE 685
MADISON, WI 53706

Director
FLORENCE L. JOHNSON

Communications Director
ANNE TURNBAUGH LOCKWOOD

Program Assistant
JANET SHORT

Consultant
BARBARA O. TAYLOR

Research Assistance
DAVID CHAWSZCZEWSKI
AMY OLSON

Design
PETER MANESIS

Typography
RICHARD BROWN & KAI JOHNSON
IMDC GRAPHICS, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION